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ABSTRACT

This document presents a brief overview of conflict resolution in school settings and defines conflict resolution as: (1) a constructive approach to interpersonal and intergroup conflicts that helps people with opposing positions work together to arrive at mutually acceptable compromise solutions; and (2) as the body of knowledge and practice developed to realize the approach. It also presents categories of program types: (1) programs in which the disputants work among themselves to settle their differences; and (2) programs in which a mediator (an uninvolved impartial third party) helps the disputants reach agreement. The following themes of conflict resolution are reviewed: (1) active listening; (2) cooperation between disputants; (3) acceptance of each other's differences; and (4) creative problem-solving. The value of these programs beyond crime prevention is discussed. The digest highlights the curriculum-based Resolving Conflict Creatively progam operating in New York City (New York) public schools. An examination of program effectiveness looks at evaluation and key components. A final section on the future of conflict resolution discusses inservice teacher training and funding questions. Seven resources and seven references are included. (JB)

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CONFLICT RESOLUTION PROGRAMS IN SCHOOLS

As in life in general, some conflict is a normal occurrence in all schools. It is often particularly pervasive in urban schools, as a result of their large size, limited resources, and greatly diverse populations. To cope with the institutional problems created by conflict, and to help students and staff handle conflict better, conflict resolution has recently been legitimized as a valid topic of discussion and study. There are now thousands of school-based programs in the nation. Students are learning a new way of fighting — listening to the other person's viewpoints and discussing their differences until a compromise can be worked out.

The programs are in every state, in rural schools as well as inner-city schools, and they involve children from kindergarten through high school. For example:

- Three-fourths of San Francisco's public schools have student conflict managers.
- In New York City, more than 100 schools with about 80,000 students have some kind of program.
- In Chicago, all students take a dispute resolution course in ninth or tenth grade.
- In New Mexico, a statewide mediation program involves 30,000 students.
- In Ann Arbor, a conflict management curriculum reaches all of the city's students.

Conflict Resolution Defined

Conflict resolution is a constructive approach to interpersonal and intergroup conflicts that helps people with opposing positions work together to arrive at mutually acceptable compromise solutions. The term now also refers to the body of knowledge and practice developed to realize the approach. Conflict resolution programs can encompass any or all of a variety of components. Roughly they fall into two categories: (1) programs in which the disputants work among themselves to settle their differences, and (2) programs in which a mediator — an uninvolved, impartial "third party" — helps the disputants reach agreement.

The major themes of conflict resolution programs are active listening, where participants summarize what each has said to ensure accurate comprehension; cooperation between disputants; acceptance of each other's differences; and creative problem-solving, which takes into account each disputant's position. The programs emphasize learning from experience, with teachers serving as facilitators and coaches. Through role-playing and a variety of team projects, students learn how to deal with anger and how to work with others to arrive at win-win solutions. Schools with mediation programs use students as mediators so they can learn from experience how conflicts can be resolved peacefully.

Educators like Teachers College's Morton Deutsch laid the theoretical groundwork for conflict resolution programs, arguing that schools should not try to eliminate or prevent conflict but should encourage and promote lively, effective controversy; conflict prevents stagnation, stimulates interest and curiosity, allows problems to be aired, and is at the root of personal and social change.

The Value of Conflict Resolution in Schools

Conflict resolution, along with its student mediation component, is being promoted as "the Fourth R" by some advocates. While growth of this movement is partly a response to the spread of violence among the young, its value can transcend simple crime prevention. San Francisco's Community Board Center for Policy and Training, which in 1982 introduced a model for student mediation programs, sees conflict management as an essential skill for a democratic society. And, some of the programs in New York City are part of a broader peace education curriculum that also addresses prejudice, discrimination, sexism, and racism.

Despite the spread of conflict resolution programs to all parts of the nation, there are considerable differences in the available resources and in the extent and scope of the programs. Some districts offer only a mediation component, with the sole goal of cutting down on student violence. Others start with mediation and then add a conflict resolution curriculum that calls for more active student participation. Some districts have tried to operate on a shoestring; others have received outside support and have adopted conflict resolution on a large scale, with efforts anchored to a curriculum.

An Illustration

One of New York's programs — Resolving Conflict Creatively (RCCP) — is a good example of a curriculum-based program. RCCP is a collaborative effort between New York City's Board of Education and a nonprofit group, Educators for Social Responsibility (ESR). RCCP, which began in 1985 with 18 teachers in three schools, now involves over 1,000 teachers and 30,000 students in 100 elementary and secondary schools and in special education programs.

Curriculum. RCCP offers a ten-unit curriculum with lessons on intergroup relations, cooperative learning, and dispute resolution techniques. While classroom teachers set aside time for lessons in conflict resolution, they are encouraged to infuse conflict resolution skills into other subject areas.

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Student Mediators. In 12 of the schools, 20 to 40 students a year in fourth, fifth, and sixth grades get three days of mediation training. They then serve as mediators, facilitating communication between disputants. Student mediators do not act as judges or police officers. RCCP introduces student mediation only in schools that have been participating in the conflict resolution program for at least a year and have a group of teachers who regularly use the RCCP curriculum.

Training. RCCP provides a 20-hour training course for teachers; mediator training for interested students, parents, and staff; and "outreach seminars" to help all students become aware that a nonviolent technique is available at the school for resolving conflicts. Parents attend ten four-hour workshops and then lead workshops for others.

Program Effectiveness

Evaluation. Since the programs around the nation are relatively new, there are no quantitative studies of their impact available yet. The International Center for Cooperation and Conflict Resolution has completed a longitudinal study, to be published in 1992.

Students report that they feel better about themselves and safer at school. They handle conflicts quickly, sometimes taking only minutes to deal with situations. Many schools report that student mediators help solve large numbers of disputes — in New York, they resolve an average of 100 disputes a year at each school in the program — and that the disputes remain settled in the vast majority of cases. Often the best student mediators are those who had been considered troublemakers.

Teachers report fewer fights and more caring student behavior. Administrators, noticing improved attendance and a dramatic decline in the number of suspensions, find that they spend less time on disciplinary matters.

One of the long-term benefits of this new approach is that students, teachers, and parents can arrive at a change in attitude toward conflict: they progress from seeing it as either a problem to be swept under the rug or an opening for confrontation — both of which are harmful — to seeing it as a process that defines values and leads to growth.

Key Components. Conflict resolution programs are best used as part of a long-range comprehensive plan to improve the learning climate at a school and to teach students alternatives to violence. Thus, conflict resolution should be included as a regular part of the school programs and curricula.

The Future of Conflict Resolution

Training. Although there is a growing body of practice and theory, the conflict resolution movement is less than ten years old. Conflict resolution is not yet part of the curriculum in the vast majority of colleges of education. Inservice teacher training for these programs comes from outside consultants and is limited; as a result, teachers are not trained in conflict resolution as extensively as they are in their subject areas.

Funding. Since most of the money for school programs has come from outside sources, a key concern is whether they can become self-sustaining. Institutionalizing conflict resolution theory and practices by absorbing them into the administrative and managerial structure of the school, and infusing them into as much of the curricula as possible, would not only help contain costs. It would help everyone in the school — staff, parents, and students — integrate conflict resolution into their lives.

— Morton Inger

Resources

American Bar Association's Special Committee on Dispute Resolution
1800 M St., NW
Washington, DC 20036

Educators for Social Responsibility (ESR)
475 Riverside Dr., Room 450
New York, NY 10115

International Center for Cooperation and Conflict Resolution
Box 6, Teachers College, Columbia University
New York, NY 10027

National Association for Mediation in Education (NAME)
139 Whitmore St.
Amherst, MA 01003

National Institute for Dispute Resolution
1901 L St., NW, Suite 600
Washington, DC 20036

Resolving Conflict Creatively Program (RCCP)
New York City Public Schools
163 Third Ave., Room 239
New York, NY 10003

School Initiatives Program
Community Board Center for Policy and Training
149 Ninth St.
San Francisco, CA 94103

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